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Ira S. Lowry

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Santa Monica, California 90406

THE SCIENCE AND POLITICS OF ETHNIC ENUMERATION\*

Ira S. Lowry

The Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California

Introduction

✓ In April 1980, the Bureau of the Census will begin its decennial effort to detail the ethnic composition of the American population. Its conclusions will be of much more than academic interest: Under current laws and regulations, the 1980 census reports on ethnicity will significantly influence everyone's access to education, employment, housing, and a wide assortment of federal benefits. It is therefore important for us as citizens as well as scientists to understand and assess the Bureau's plans for ethnic enumeration.

Briefly, <sup>this</sup> ~~my~~ paper argues that the Bureau does not know how to conduct a scientific ethnic census. That should not be surprising, because social science has yet to offer validated methodological instruction. In fact, ~~I see~~ the elements of a vicious circle, <sup>are indicated.</sup> Most scientific research dealing with ethnic distinctions relies on census data and therefore on the ethnic concepts used in past censuses. The main plea of the science lobby is for continuity in census concepts and methods, so the Bureau is encouraged to perpetuate its follies. Only rarely do social scientists challenge the absence of a coherent conceptual basis for the Bureau's ethnic distinctions, or the known unreliability of the methods it uses to identify an individual's ethnic status. Those who do challenge are ineffective because they cannot offer better alternatives.

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\* This paper was prepared for the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in San Francisco, California, 3-8 January 1980. It was presented at a session on "The 1980 Census: Plans, Procedures, Uses, and Evaluation," organized by Paul C. Glick.

Mr. Glick and others at the Bureau of the Census were helpful in supplying documents and answering my questions. At Rand, Donna Betancourt helped me to locate sources and verify information; she also supervised production of this document. Arturo Gandara and Kevin F. McCarthy commented helpfully on the draft.

Where science is weak, politics flourish. Civil rights legislation since 1960 has created vested interests in ethnic classification and enumeration, interests whose efforts are clearly visible in the 1980 census instrument and field procedures. Various ethnic lobbies have pressed hard for separate status in census reporting, for more complete enumeration of their constituencies, and for identification procedures that classify marginal cases with a favored group. Ethnic enumeration has become so important a practical issue that the federal Office of Management and Budget has imposed a uniform system of ethnic accounting on all federal agencies, including the Bureau of the Census.

In my judgment, the Bureau has dealt responsibly with all these pressures, embracing the most sensible and resisting the most outrageous proposals. But this balancing act will become increasingly difficult if, as I expect, ethnic lobbies multiply and their influence increases. The Bureau badly needs a solidly scientific basis for ethnic concepts and enumeration procedures, as a defense against manipulation. This essay concludes by recommending some specific steps the Bureau could take toward securing the knowledge it needs.

#### The Concept of Ethnicity

Throughout this paper, I shall use the term "ethnicity" to denote a particular kind of social identity--that which derives from belonging to a group whose members share a common race, religion, language, or national origin, or some combination of these factors.\* Such groups are larger than families and, usually, smaller than nations; and the members of each are bound together by their sense of a common history and destiny, often despite powerful differences in values and life styles.

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\* In common speech, the term "ethnicity" has a variety of meanings, the most usual being "national origin." Thus, the phrase "white ethnics" is often used to describe groups such as Italian- or Polish-Americans, a usage that appears in some scientific writing. Also, ethnicity as a cultural distinction is sometimes contrasted with race as a genetic or morphological distinction. However, my usage is etymologically sound, has precedents in the literature of the social sciences, and is surpassingly convenient for this discussion.

Because ours is a nation of immigrants formed in an era of global upheaval and long-distance migration, we have a very large number of distinguishable ethnic groups. For example, the Bureau of the Census has compiled a list of some 1,500 ethnic appellations in current use. But many ethnic groups are only sparsely represented in the United States; and among many others, the sense of difference from ethnically adjoining groups is slight.

Clearly, ethnic identity has its roots in some historical community of people who inhabited a specific territory, developed a common language and culture, and practiced endogamy. The surprising feature of ethnic identity is its persistence for generations among those who left their homelands to mingle with other populations, as has been the case of immigrants to America.

According to an idea articulated as early as 1782 and gaining currency throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, America was destined to be a melting pot of immigrant ethnic groups, each losing its separate identity in a new blend that drew the best genetic and cultural qualities from its components.\* The idea was so appealing to both the popular and scientific mind that contrary evidence was rarely noted. Throughout our history, conspicuous divisions have persisted between blacks, whites, Orientals, and Latins; between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews; and between Irish, Italians, English, and other national-origin groups. The divisions are reflected in ethnic endogamy, voluntary associations, and exclusionary practices in employment, education, and housing.

\* The history of the "melting pot" idea is well presented in Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1964, Ch. 5. I should acknowledge here that Gordon is my principal guide to the sociology of ethnic groups.

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The requiem for the melting-pot theory was finally pronounced by Glazer and Moynihan in 1963. *Beyond the Melting Pot*, their study of New York City's major ethnic groups, concluded that "The notion that the intense and unprecedented mixture of ethnic and religious groups in American life was soon to blend into a homogeneous end product has outlived its usefulness, and also its credibility. In the meantime, the persisting facts of ethnicity demand attention, understanding, and accommodation."\* More recently, the same authors perceive a worldwide recrudescence of ethnicity as a principle of social and political organization.\*\*

In America, the turn-of-the-century ideology of the melting pot has indeed lost ground to an alternative, the ideology of "cultural pluralism." Its adherents propose that, rather than seeking to assimilate ethnic groups into a common American culture, we should work to preserve distinctive ethnic heritages because each tradition nourishes its members' self-esteem and adds flavor to our national life. During the past two decades, the rhetoric of ethnic activists has increasingly stressed the validity of their own traditions rather than the "Americanization" of their constituencies, and our schoolbooks have been rewritten accordingly.

However, the joke seems to be on the cultural pluralists. According to one thoughtful student of assimilation, most ethnic minorities have readily assimilated American culture even while maintaining their group identities. Milton Gordon cites an impressive body of sociological evidence supporting the proposition that the major cultural divisions in America today are along the lines of social class; regional and rural-urban distinctions, though once important, have greatly attenuated under the onslaught on modern mass communication and geographical mobility. Social classes also exist within ethnic groups;

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\* Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1963, p. v.

\*\* Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (eds.), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1975, pp. 1-26.

and the norms, aspirations, customs, and behavior of middle-class blacks, Jews, Puerto Ricans, white Catholics, and white Protestants are all both very much alike and considerably different from the common culture of their lower-class coethnics.\*

In Gordon's view, cultural assimilation has generally preceded and need not be followed by "structural assimilation" as indicated by ethnically mixed participation in organizations and social relationships. On the contrary, "within the ethnic group there develops a network of organizations and informal social relationships which permits and encourages the members of the ethnic group to remain within the confines of the group for all of their primary relationships and some of their secondary relationships throughout all stages of the life-cycle."\*\*

The result is a set of ethnically enclosed subsocieties, each more or less parallel in class structure and class culture (although the distribution of members among the classes varies considerably between ethnic groups, reflecting primarily the group's economic history).

#### Is Ethnicity Measurable?

Not all sociologists agree fully with Gordon's model of our national social structure as an orthogonal matrix of ethnicity and social class,\*\*\* and Gordon himself offers qualifications that I have not detailed. But I find the model persuasive in accounting for many features of the American scene in 1980, and seminal in that it suggests what we should do to improve our understanding of the functional significance of ethnic identity in our society and its appropriate place in national policy: We need first to establish a reliable method of ethnic identification; then, for the numerically important ethnic groups, we should measure the degree of their ethnic enclosure.

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\* Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, op. cit., pp. 40-59; illustrative material is presented in pp. 160-232.

\*\* Ibid., p. 34.

\*\*\* See William L. Yancey, Eugene P. Ericksen, and Richard N. Julian, "Emergent Ethnicity: A Review and Reformulation," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 41, No. 3, June 1976, pp. 391-403, both for the paper's argument and its helpful bibliography.



A major impediment to the scientific classification of ethnic groups is the lack of a clearly specified membership rule. An individual's ethnic status is partly ascribed by his community from observation of his parentage, physical characteristics, language or mode of speech, organizational affiliations, and social circle. Some but not all these personal characteristics can be manipulated by the individual himself to reinforce or weaken the communal perception, so ethnicity is also partly an achieved status. An individual may place either a positive or negative value on his ascribed ethnicity; and in either case may consider his ethnic identity to be important or unimportant. A particular ethnic identity may not be consistently ascribed by others even when they have access to the same information about the subject individual, and self-identification may differ from the communally ascribed status.

When self-identification and communal identification agree, they are mutually reinforcing; when they disagree, the discord of mutual expectations generates a tension that is resolved only when one view or the other prevails. The problems of ethnic identification therefore focus on the marginal cases, whether of an individual who seeks to separate himself from a well-defined ethnic group, or of a group that is itself disintegrating or merging with some adjoining ethnic group. For example, a reinterview study by the Bureau of the Census showed that people who identify themselves as Hispanic (vs. non-Hispanic) in one interview often report differently in a second interview, and the reverse.\* The same study shows that response consistency is strongly related to ascertainable facts of family history such as the ethnic consistency of parental lineage, and generational residence histories.

A general empirical study of ethnic self-identification and its objective correlatives would help considerably to resolve classification problems and to guide the design of an ethnic questionnaire suitable for mass administration, as in the decennial census. However,

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\* U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing: 1970, Evaluation and Research Program, PHC(E)-9, *Accuracy of Data for Selected Population Characteristics as Measured by Reinterviews*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1974.

the systematic classification of ethnic groups also requires other information concerning the functional importance of the nominated groups. Here, I think that a joint or parallel study of the degree of ethnic enclosure would be critical. Let us say, for example, that we locate a group of individuals who consistently identify themselves as Armenians. To what degree do they form a separate subsociety whose members "remain within the confines of the group for all of their primary relationships and some of their secondary relationships throughout all stages of the life-cycle"? Without going into detail, I suggest that the measurement of ethnic enclosure is fully within the state of the art of survey research. Given the appropriate data on a substantial sample of the relevant populations, it would be feasible to develop a coherent system of ethnic classification that reflected not only ethnic differences, but intergroup relationships. In short, such a study would reveal the implicit ethnic structure of American society.

The final section of this essay suggests how such research might be conducted. I should at this point reassure the reader that I do not suppose that the decennial census is an appropriate vehicle for gathering all the information needed for such an ethnic analysis. Rather, I suppose that such an analysis would teach us how to better conduct an ethnic census, just as quite detailed studies of social class have taught us how to conduct more efficient surveys and censuses of socio-economic status.

#### Ethnic Identification in the Decennial Census

I began by asserting that the Bureau's planning for the 1980 ethnic census lacked a solid foundation in science, and that the absence of science facilitated the intrusion of politics. Having dealt above with the scientific issues, I turn now to the political ones. Beginning with a few paragraphs of census history, I will try to illuminate the political context of the 1980 ethnic enumeration.

The first decennial census was taken in 1790, pursuant to Article I, Sec. 2 of the Constitution, which required a decennial enumeration of the new nation's people as the basis for apportionment among the states of both congressional representation and direct

federal taxes. That simple decennial enumeration grew into today's immense compendium of demographic, social, and economic statistics. The expansion of the census's scope reflects a growing federal role in domestic affairs, a shifting agenda of national concerns, and the gradual legitimization of the social sciences.\*

The first ethnic data (1790-1820) were essentially byproducts of the distinction between white citizens (counted for representation and taxation) and others with fewer civil rights and liberties: foreigners not naturalized, slaves (presumably black), and tribal Indians, and, on some early schedules, "all other free persons, except Indians not taxed." In 1830, the first nationally uniform schedule distinguished white from "colored" persons. In 1850, the concept of color was codified as white, black, or mulatto; and country of birth was first recorded for free inhabitants.

The censuses of 1870 and 1880 made a quantum leap in ethnic identification. In 1870, all inhabitants were classified as to color (white, black, mulatto, Chinese, or Indian) and country of birth; and it was recorded whether or not each parent was of foreign birth. In 1880, the specific country of birth was recorded for each parent, and a special census of the Indian population was conducted under the supervision of that giant of government science, John Wesley Powell. The Indian census schedule is interesting because it probes in an unprecedented way for ethnic identity, not just civil status.\*\*

From 1890 through 1930, the census schedules gradually increased their attention to the complexities of ethnic identification, a response to the social and political issues raised by the swelling tide of immigration.\*\*\* Each census recorded country of birth for the

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\* Details of census schedules in the following paragraphs are taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population and Housing Inquiries in U.S. Decennial Censuses, 1790-1970*, Working Paper No. 39, Washington, D.C., 1973.

\*\* Enumerated persons are distinguished as to ancestral mixture (both tribal and non-Indian), languages spoken (both tribal and non-Indian), habitual clothing ("citizen's" vs. tribal dress), and residence on or off reservations; and non-Indian adoptees into Indian tribes are identified. See *ibid.*, p. 69.

\*\*\* During the peak decade, 1905-1914, over 10 million immigrants officially entered the United States, increasing the national

enumerated person and both parents; and by 1920, language questions included "mother tongue" for all three persons. For the foreign-born, both the date of immigration and current civil status were reported. In 1930, the list of categories for "race and color" grew to include white, Negro, Mexican, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hindu, and Korean, with (for the first time) space for other write-in choices.

The census of 1960 was the first to use self-enumeration extensively.\* The census schedule was consequently simplified and vetted for possibly offensive language, with some loss of precision. The former "color or race" question was replaced by one which read: "Is this person--White, Negro, American Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Part Hawaiian, Aleut, Eskimo, (etc.)?" The respondent had to induce the categorical structure within which identity was sought, and write in an answer (rather than checking a box). Country of birth was included for the enumerated person and both parents; and for the enumerated person only, mother tongue. In New York state only, a redundant nativity question distinguished "U.S., Puerto Rico, Elsewhere" as places of birth, and asked whether those born "Elsewhere" were U.S. citizens.

Problems with the 1960 answers to the implicit color or race question prompted a return in 1970 to an explicit "color or race" query with checkoff entries for "white, Negro or black, Indian (Amer.), Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean, Other"; and write-in space for a specified "other" or an Indian tribal designation. At some distance from the color or race question, the respondent was asked the state or country of birth for the enumerated person and his parents *and* to describe that person's "origin or descent" as one of the following:\*\*

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population by an eighth. The census of 1920 enumerated nearly 14 million foreign-born residents in a population of 106 million.

\*"Self-enumeration" must be interpreted loosely. A form is mailed or delivered to each household, covering all members of the household. Typically, the form is filled out by one member (sometimes even a non-member) on behalf of all members of the household.

\*\*Independently of this question concerning Hispanic origin or descent, the Bureau also coded respondents with Hispanic surnames.

- |                |                             |
|----------------|-----------------------------|
| o Mexican      | o Central or South American |
| o Puerto Rican | o Other Spanish             |
| o Cuban        | o No, none of these         |

For those who were foreign-born, the schedule asks whether they are now naturalized, aliens, or were born abroad of American citizens; when they "came to the United States to stay," and "What language, other than English, was spoken in this person's home when he was a child?"

#### Playing the Numbers Game

Civil rights legislation and judicial decisions after 1960 bestowed a new significance on the Census Bureau's ethnic enumerations. A combination of laws and executive orders<sup>\*</sup> prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in voter registration, education, public and private employment, privately owned public accommodations, public facilities, the sale or rental of publicly assisted and most private housing, mortgage lending and property insurance, and selecting the beneficiaries of federal grants under some 400 programs administered by over 25 federal agencies.

Whereas earlier statutes and judicial decisions had addressed problems of overt discrimination against specific individuals, the Congress and the courts went further in the 1960s, instructing federal authorities to look for patterns of discrimination, as evidenced by the underrepresentation of "disadvantaged minorities" in the activity of interest; and, where such underrepresentation was found, requiring "affirmative action" by the relevant party to correct it, whether or not the underrepresentation resulted from deliberate discriminatory policies.

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\* The principal laws were the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (PL 88-352), the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (PL 89-110), the Civil Rights Act of 1968 (PL 90-284), the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 (PL 92-261), and the Voting Rights Act of 1975 (PL 94-73). The principal executive orders were 11063 (Equal Opportunity in Housing), 1962; 11246 (Equal Employment Opportunity), 1965; 11478 (Equal Employment Opportunity in the Federal Government), 1969; and 11764 (Nondiscrimination in Federally Assisted Programs), 1974.

The "pattern of discrimination" and "affirmative action" concepts together form a watershed in civil rights policy. Their underlying principle is that each minority group is entitled to a fair share of all "openings," whether ballots, jobs in a factory, seats in a classroom, apartments in a housing development, or food stamps. And each group's fair share is, basically, its share of the population at large or some relevant subset of that population.\* By 1965, counting ethnic minorities had become a serious business, affecting the outcomes of elections, admission to graduate schools, marketing strategies of housing developers, federal contract awards, hiring, firing, and promotion policies of private employers, and the disbursement of federal grants to state and local governments.

I have yet to learn who decided, and on what basis, which ethnic minorities were candidates for affirmative action on their behalf. By whatever process, federal authorities settled on four such groups: American Indians or Alaskan Natives, Asian or Pacific Islanders, Blacks, and Hispanics. Whereas substantial underrepresentation of any of these groups is grounds for a civil rights compliance action, fair shares are not defined for any of the commonly distinguished components of each group (e.g., for Puerto Ricans as distinct from Mexican Hispanics), or for any ethnic minority not included in the Big Four.\*\*

Ethnic activists were quick to understand the practical significance of the fair share principle: The larger the official count of

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\*The general principle has many qualifications that are specific to the various statutes and regulations. Most qualifications center on the appropriate definition in a particular case of the population which is "at risk" of discrimination. For example, ethnic underrepresentation in employment by a particular firm may be tested with reference to the ethnic composition of the labor force living in the firm's vicinity and already possessing the relevant skills; or the base may include all those plausibly trainable for the jobs in question. The firm's labor market may be determined to vary with job classification, from local to national.

\*\*The Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs does recognize possible discrimination in executive and middle-management jobs against "members of various religious and ethnic groups primarily but not exclusively of Eastern, Middle, and Southern European ancestry, such as Jews, Catholics, Italians, Greeks, and Slavic groups," but its compliance guidelines for employers do not (yet?) include the arithmetical tests provided for the Big Four (41 *Code of Federal Regulations* 60-50).

their group's numbers, the greater would be the group's legal advantage in the competition for jobs, promotions, placement in training programs, housing, education, and access to federal benefits. So began the great numbers game of the 1970s.\*

The census of 1970 was disappointing to ethnic activists in several respects. First, postcensal analysis convinced the Bureau that, despite an excellent enumeration overall, the census substantially undercounted blacks (by 7.7 percent, vs. 1.9 for whites) and, probably, Hispanics and Asian and Pacific Islanders.\*\* The basic reasons were that within each minority group there is an above-average incidence of persons with irregular living arrangements (making them hard to locate); persons who cannot read the Bureau's mailed messages (so do not learn about the purposes or even the existence of the census); persons who receive census forms but do not complete and return them (because the form's intricacies are beyond their comprehension); and persons who have real or fancied reasons for being officially invisible (such as illegal aliens).

Second, the responses to the battery of ethnic questions did not allow the Bureau to say with confidence who belonged in which group.

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\* The nature of the game is neatly captured in a recent interchange between the Bureau, the National Black Caucus of Elected Officials, and a prominent Mexican-American politician. At a meeting of the Caucus, Larry Lucas, a Bureau spokesman, predicted that Hispanics would not outnumber blacks in the U.S. until the year 2057. According to a press report, "Eddie Williams [a member of the Caucus] said talk of a fast-growing Hispanic population, with its potential Hispanic political gains, has 'created some tensions between blacks and Hispanics.' Although black and Hispanic leaders are unhappy about it, the politics of poverty have put the two groups in competition for their share of dwindling federal dollars. And, as Lucas told the local officials, the census is 'involved in how the national pie is cut up.'" (*Los Angeles Times*, 26 November 1979.)

Within a few days, the Bureau's projection was hotly disputed by Mario Obledo, California's Secretary of Health and Welfare, who took the Bureau to task for underenumerating Hispanics and predicted that "Hispanics will be the largest minority group in this country sometime before the end of the century." (*Los Angeles Times*, 30 November 1979).

\*\* U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing: 1970, Evaluation and Research Program, PHC(E)-4, *Estimates of Coverage of Population by Sex, Race, and Age: Demographic Analysis*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1973.

On about a tenth of the person-records, the question on "color or race" was unanswered. Write-in responses included many unclassifiable answers such as "American," racially uninformative national origins, hyphenated designations presumably reflecting mixed parentage, and other puzzlers.\* It was often difficult to reconcile answers to the "color or race" question with answers to the "origin or descent," "place of birth," or "home-spoken language" questions. In postcensal reinterviews, respondents often answered differently than they did in the original enumeration.\*\*

Ethnic spokesmen further speculated that their constituents often failed to recognize the category intended for them by the Bureau because they had developed different self-appellations (e.g., Chicano as opposed to Mexican or Spanish); and that some chose to misrepresent their ethnicity for ideological reasons ("Wherever my family came from, I'm an American now") or practical concerns (e.g., blacks who have "passed" as whites).

Finally, some ethnic activists were disappointed that the census schedule, the Bureau's coding guide, and tabulation formats jointly militated against identification of various ethnic groups that were arguably distinctive in their racial inheritance, social and economic status, culture, and aspirations.\*\*\* Some chose to be insulted as well as incensed by the Bureau's failure to draw finer distinctions.

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\*Tabulations of the long form administered to a 5 percent sample of households originally indicated that the sample equivalent of 517,000 persons had reported some racial designation other than those explicitly named on the census schedule. Editors subsequently reclassified three-fifths of these cases as "white." (Ibid., p. 4.)

\*\*For example, about 18 percent of those who reported Spanish origin or descent in the original enumeration reported otherwise upon reinterview; and 23 percent who were so identified at reinterview were reported as non-Spanish in the original interview. Both calculations exclude nonrespondents. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Census of Population and Housing: 1970, Evaluation and Research Program, PHC(E)-9, *Accuracy of Data for Selected Population Characteristics as Measured by Reinterviews*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1974, Table D.)

\*\*\*For example, in 1978 a representative of the Taiwanese Club of America pointed out to the Bureau that "The number of Taiwanese-Americans in this country is approaching 100,000. . . . These immigrants



When the Bureau began to plan the 1980 census, it formed advisory committees for the black, Spanish-origin, and Asian and Pacific-American populations. These groups addressed their inquiries and advice mainly to four salient issues: the Bureau's affirmative action employment plan, publicity and field procedures that would affect the completeness of minority enumeration, the format of ethnic questions on the 1980 census schedule, and the Bureau's plans for tabulating ethnic data. Each committee lobbied vigorously for measures that it believed would increase the 1980 count of its constituents or would make those constituents more visible in census reports.\*

I think it is fair to say that the Bureau responded constructively to the often conflicting advice and occasional peremptory demands of its advisory committees. In a series of pretests, it experimented with publicity and expensive field procedures aimed at locating minority populations and persuading them to participate in the census. It also experimented with the format of questions related to ethnic identification, constrained as always by the space available on the census schedules and the cost and technical problems of coding open-ended responses. It was also constrained by a directive of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued in May 1978.\*\* OMB promulgated five basic racial and ethnic categories for federal statistics and program administrative reporting, whose definitions were as follows:

- o *American Indian or Alaskan Native.* A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North

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have their own unique social background. Their educational level, spoken language, and cultural tradition are grossly different from those of the early Chinese immigrants. . . . The majority of Taiwanese do not want to be called 'Chinese.'" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Minutes and Report of Committee Recommendations, Census Advisory Committee on the Asian and Pacific-American Population for the 1980 Census*, 9 November 1978, p. 31.)

\* The *Minutes and Report of Committee Recommendations* of the three committees were published by the U.S. Bureau of the Census at intervals during 1977-79. The Bureau apparently offered to charter an American Indian Advisory Committee, but the leaders of that constituency preferred less formal consultation.

\*\* The National Archives of the United States, *Federal Register*, Vol. 43, No. 87, pp. 19269-70.

America, and who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition.

- o *Asian or Pacific Islander.* A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands. This area includes, for example, China, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippine Islands, and Samoa.
- o *Black.* A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.
- o *Hispanic.* A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.
- o *White.* A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East.

Although the directive encourages the separate reporting of "race" (designating all of the above except Hispanic as races) and "ethnicity" (Hispanic origin/not of Hispanic origin), Hispanic ethnicity takes precedence over race in a combined format. More detailed data may be collected, but must be collapsible into the basic racial and ethnic categories listed above. Finally, OMB advises that "The category which most closely reflects the individual's recognition in his community should be used for purposes of reporting on persons who are of mixed racial and/or ethnic origins."

#### Ethnic Identification in the 1980 Census

The census of 1980 continues the practice introduced in 1950 of using a short form for 100 percent enumeration and a longer form for a sample of respondents. The short form includes a "color or race" query (Q. 4) and an "origin or descent" query (Q. 7). The long form asks for country of birth (Q. 11), citizenship and date of immigration if foreign-born (Q. 12), domestic language and proficiency in spoken English (Q. 13), and ancestry (Q. 14). The long form, whose sample is adequate for national, state, and large SMSA estimates of fairly

small populations, thus contains seven clues to ethnic identity.\* Because the instrument is self-administered, the answers reflect a respondent's essentially unaided comprehension of the questions and his unguided perception of the appropriate responses. Generally, some adult member of the household is expected to complete the form on behalf of all its members; but friends, neighbors, volunteers, or census field staff may help those who seek help.

Ethnic lobbying for a place in the sun is most visible in Q. 4, which reads:

4. Is this person --	<input type="radio"/> White	<input type="radio"/> Asian Indian
<i>Fill one circle.</i>	<input type="radio"/> Black or Negro	<input type="radio"/> Hawaiian
	<input type="radio"/> Japanese	<input type="radio"/> Guamanian
	<input type="radio"/> Chinese	<input type="radio"/> Samoan
	<input type="radio"/> Filipino	<input type="radio"/> Eskimo
	<input type="radio"/> Korean	<input type="radio"/> Aleut
	<input type="radio"/> Vietnamese	<input type="radio"/> Other-- <i>Specify</i>
	<input type="radio"/> Indian (Amer.)	↓
	Print tribe →	-----

The fourteen listed options defy classification. Some items map roughly into traditional racial distinctions, but at wildly different levels of classification. Others are more readily understood as national or territorial origins. Although only one choice is allowed, the entries are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, a respondent whose father was black and whose mother was white could choose either or both racial designations; or an Oriental living in Hawaii might consider himself both Chinese and Hawaiian. Anyone

\* It does not include the 1970 items on country of birth for the parents of the enumerated person. The census last asked about the parents' "mother tongues" in 1920.

dissatisfied by the alternatives offered can write in some other appellation, but must intuit the relevant aspect of his identity.\*

The intent of the short form's Q. 7 is somewhat clearer in that the options form a logically complete set:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 7. Is this person of Spanish/<br>Hispanic origin or descent?<br><br><i>Fill one circle.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="radio"/> No (not Spanish/Hispanic)</li><li><input type="radio"/> Yes, Mexican, Mexican-Amer., Chicano</li><li><input type="radio"/> Yes, Puerto Rican</li><li><input type="radio"/> Yes, Cuban</li><li><input type="radio"/> Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic</li></ul> |
|---|---|

However, neither "Spanish/Hispanic" nor "origin or descent" are rigorously defined in the accompanying instructions.\*\* A respondent whose lineage, whatever its dominant ingredients, includes any individual born in one of the named countries (or any unnamed other "Spanish/Hispanic" country) is encouraged to identify himself as Hispanic.\*\*\*

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\* The instruction sheet that will accompany the mailed-out census schedule is not very helpful. Apropos of Q. 4, it says: "Fill the circle for the category with which the person most closely identifies. If you fill the 'Indian (Amer.)' or 'Other' circle, be sure to print the name of the specific Indian tribe or specific group."

\*\* The instructions for Q. 7 read as follows: "A person is of Spanish/Hispanic origin or descent if the person identifies his or her ancestry with one of the listed groups, that is, Mexican, Puerto Rican, etc. Origin or descent (ancestry) may be viewed as the nationality group, the lineage, or country in which the person or the person's parents or ancestors were born."

\*\*\* As the Bureau's review of the 1970 "origin or descent" responses notes, "If a person had Spanish ancestry on one side of the family several generations back, he may or may not perceive himself to be of Spanish origin when reporting on the census questionnaire. . . . Since the question may have been answered on the basis of the respondent's self-perception, the idea of a 'correct' or 'incorrect' response does not seem to apply." (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Accuracy of Data for Selected Population Characteristics as Measured by Reinterviews*, op. cit., p. 5.)

I am told that the Bureau also plans, as in 1970, to flag Spanish surnames (it has a list of some 8,500 such surnames) and tabulate their incidence as an alternative measure of the Hispanic population. In the past, Spanish surname has not correlated very well with self-identified Hispanic origin or descent.

Long-form questions 11 through 13 ask for generally known or ascertainable facts: state or country of birth, citizenship status for the foreign-born, whether the enumerated person speaks a language other than English at home, and how well he speaks English. But Q. 14 seems to be a generalization of both Q. 4 and Q. 7, again lacking any clear categorical structure:

14. What is this person's ancestry? *If uncertain about how to report ancestry, see instruction guide.*

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(For example: Afro-Amer., English, French, German, Honduran, Irish, Italian, Jamaican, Korean, Lebanese, Mexican, Nigerian, Polish, Ukrainian, Venezuelan, etc.)

The instructions for answering this question, like those for Q. 7, legitimate a variety of choices for any respondent.\* The Bureau has compiled a coding guide that allocates over 1,500 possible responses among nine geographical regions of the world, but with an overriding nongeographical "Spanish" category; and at a second level, among over 170 categories that are a mixture of smaller geographical areas, national states, and multinational ethnic groups.

#### Using 1980 Ethnic Statistics

My review of census schedules over the past three decades is intended to reveal what I perceive as the gradual articulation of the

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\*"Print the ancestry group with which the person identifies. Ancestry (or origin or descent) may be viewed as the nationality group, the lineage, or the country in which the person or the person's parents or ancestors were born before their arrival in the United States. Persons who are of more than one origin and who cannot identify with a single group should print their multiple ancestry (for example, German-Irish).

Be specific; for example, if ancestry is 'Indian,' specify whether American Indian, Asian Indian, or West Indian. Distinguish Cape Verdean from Portuguese, and French Canadian from Canadian.

A religious group should not be reported as a person's ancestry."

Bureau's stance on ethnic identification. Going beyond any language actually published by the Bureau,<sup>\*</sup> I perceive its position to be as follows:

*Ethnic identity cannot be established by objective criteria, at least in largescale self-administered surveys. We therefore accept that an individual's ethnicity is whatever he says it is. The Bureau's job is to elicit self-identification and then to group the responses into recognizable categories that (a) are mandated for federal civil rights enforcement, (b) satisfy the more vocal ethnic lobbies, and (c) provide enough continuity with past census statistics to satisfy social scientists engaged in longitudinal analysis.*

In my judgment, the 1980 schedule's Q. 7, including its "tilt" in favor of Hispanic self-identification, responds quite directly to item (a) above.<sup>\*\*</sup> The peculiar list of "racial" options in Q. 4 clearly reflects skillful lobbying by Asian and Pacific Islanders. Questions 10-14 of the long form are meant mainly to meet the needs of researchers, a constituency with which the Bureau has a long and mutually supportive relationship.

However, the Bureau's success in balancing the claims of constituencies was achieved at the expense of its fundamental mission: gathering valid and reliable information about the population of the United States. I see little reason to suppose that the 1980 census statistics will describe the ethnic composition of that population in a way that supports either fairness in civil rights enforcement or progress in the social sciences. One reason is that neither the

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<sup>\*</sup> But see comments by Jacob S. Siegel, senior statistician, and Daniel B. Levine, associate director for demographic fields, in U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Minutes and Report of Committee Recommendations, Census Advisory Committee on Population Statistics*, 6 April 1979, pp. 19-24.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Compare the instructions for Q. 7 with the OMB directive on racial and ethnic reporting, *supra*.

Bureau nor its constituents has a coherent concept of ethnic identity to guide data collection and interpretation. A second reason is that the Bureau's own studies show a low order of response consistency in ethnic self-identification.

These concerns were shared by a census advisory panel appointed by the National Research Council, who reported in part as follows:\*

The nature of the [ethnic ancestry and Spanish origin] questions raises serious doubts about validity and reliability. Validity and reliability are dependent on the precision of the concept being measured. The phrases "origin or descent" and "ancestry" can refer to having one or more forebears from a particular country, or to nationality of a multinational country [sic], or to an ethnic identity (the referent most encountered in discussions of these questions). The discussions in the Panel make it clear that there were different interpretations of, or one could say confusion about, exactly what was being measured (validity). In the concrete, the answer will be what the respondent decides he or she is, or wants to be identified as, etc.

It is by no means clear that persons in similar situations and with similar characteristics will answer in the same way . . . We are speaking here not of splitting hairs, but of possibly wide variations in respondent behavior across and within generations and cultural groups leading to serious doubts about what the [ancestry] question measures or what its objective referent is . . . The Spanish origin or descent question has some of the same problems.

Reliability is important in two respects in regard to these questions. First, even if we accept the contention that the "truth" here is self-identification, would those in the household, especially adults and adolescents who do not fill out the census form, agree with the respondent? . . . Second, would the respondent identify himself or herself in the same way at a later time, if the census were taken at a different time of the year [e.g., St. Patrick's Day or Columbus Day] or if the respondent were not exposed to organized efforts to educate people to answer ethnic origin or ancestry questions in particular ways?

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\* Panel on Decennial Census Plans, Committee on National Statistics, Assembly of Behavioral and Social Sciences, National Research Council, *Counting the People in 1980: An Appraisal of Census Plans*, National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C., 1978, pp. 67-76. The quoted sentences are from pp. 71-72.

From the perspective of civil rights enforcement, there is something fundamentally wrong with the notion that ethnic status is elective. If one can gain advantages by claiming membership in a particular ethnic group, surely some of us will make unwarranted claims. Although ethnic self-identification in the census does not lead directly to advantages for each individual who reports himself as a member of a disadvantaged minority, the census's ethnic tabulations form the benchmark for many legal tests of ethnic underrepresentation. The larger the minority's count, the greater advantage all its members have in affirmative action programs.\*

It is only fair to add that the Bureau of the Census does not make civil rights enforcement policy, and cannot by itself resolve the intrinsic ambiguities of affirmative action. But neither is the Bureau required by law to choose ethnic self-identification as its criterion of classification. Both civil rights and science would be better served by a more analytical approach to data collection and dissemination.

From the perspective of social science, ethnic self-identification is indeed salient evidence of an individual's social identity. But for it to be scientifically useful evidence, three conditions must be met: First, self-identification must be elicited in an ethnically neutral context; the respondent must not be "led" to a choice among alternatives, none of which may in fact apply. Second, the intensity of an ethnic self-identification must be established by additional probes; for many who readily acknowledge a particular ethnic background, it is a trivial rather than salient element of self-concept. Third, self-identification must be analytically related to ascertainable facts about a person's life history, ancestry,

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\* In affirmative action programs, the numerators of ethnic participation rates are even more unreliable than the denominators. For instance, under the rules of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, employers engaged in affirmative action compliance are forbidden to ask job applicants their ethnic identities until after they have been hired; and are discouraged from doing so then. Typically, an ethnic identity is assigned to each employee by his employer, based on whatever clues can be found in physiognomy, speech patterns, name, and place of birth. Employees rarely know how they have been classified.



and behavior; only as such relationships are established by statistical analysis do ethnic data acquire functional significance.

#### Improving the Census's Ethnic Statistics

The 1980 census schedule is now fixed, and the specific ethnic items on which the U.S. population reports next April will be widely used both for public policy and academic research. Granted the doubts I share with the panel organized by the National Research Council and with some members of the Bureau's Advisory Committee on Population Statistics, what can be done to limit misinterpretation of the ethnic statistics that the Bureau will publish in due course? How should future censuses and intercensal surveys approach ethnic identification?

First, it is clearly appropriate to include in each publication that carries ethnic statistics a clear statement of the process that generated them and the reasons why they must be assumed to be imprecise. That statement should indicate that what was tabulated was the ethnic identities assigned to each member of a household by whoever completed the enumeration schedule; that the schedule guided respondents toward Hispanic identifications; and that response consistency, when it has been tested, is not much over 60 percent for some minorities.

Second, I urge a postcensal survey of ethnic identification that would serve two purposes: (a) It would clarify the meaning of the 1980 ethnic statistics, and (b) it would aid in designing future surveys and censuses.

An appropriate instrument for a postcensal probe of ethnicity would differ substantially from any that I have ever caught the Bureau using. First, its design would reflect a coherent analytical purpose, that of establishing a scale of intensity for ethnic self-identification and relating the scalar values insofar as possible to ascertainable facts about the respondents. Second, its format would reflect survey techniques that have been extensively used and evaluated in social-psychological surveys. These techniques include devices such as screening questions to eliminate respondents who do not have opinions

about the matter at issue, nondirective probes for categories of self-identification, questions with scaled rather than dyadic responses, and redundant questions to test response consistency. There should be detailed questions about family lineage, languages, and residence history, and questions that measure the respondent's interaction with others of his ethnic group. The instrument should also ask about the respondent's religious heritage and affiliations, a topic that is statutorily excluded from the decennial census but is legally permissible in surveys to which response is not compulsory.

Although the Bureau is undoubtedly aware of the accomplishments of surveys using such social-psychological techniques,\* it has not often used them. I am not sure of all the reasons; but one, certainly, is concern about the reactions of Congressional "know-nothings" who from time to time erupt about the Bureau's nosiness. Another, I feel confident, is institutional conservatism; the Bureau has a solid reputation as our national fact-gatherer, which it hesitates to contaminate by venturing into the softer area of attitude research. Finally, I am sure that there are some at the Bureau who are genuinely concerned about adverse public reactions to such probing inquiries--even though survey researchers generally agree that such reactions are rare among respondents.\*\* In particular, one major Jewish organization and at

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\* In fact, over a decade ago, the Bureau sponsored a conference on *Survey Applications of Social Psychological Questions* (reported by Norman W. Storer, and published under the above title as U.S. Bureau of the Census Working Paper 29, Washington, D.C., 1969). According to the introduction, "The immediate occasion for taking up this general topic is the increasing involvement of the Census Bureau, especially through its current population survey, in collecting data relevant to new social programs in such areas as poverty, manpower training, education, urban redevelopment, and health care." Despite the generally positive conclusion of the conferees, the Bureau did not subsequently make much use of "social-psychological questions" in its surveys, even those conducted under contract to other federal agencies.

\*\* The conference report cited above notes that "Experience in the field has shown consistently that respondents are much less likely to be disturbed by questions that are sensitive [i.e., whose answers might embarrass or humiliate the respondent] than are their "public protectors"--Congressmen, spokesmen for ethnic groups, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), etc. No good examples could be offered

least one minor Protestant denomination have officially opposed even noncompulsory religious censuses, at least if conducted by an agency of government.

Some who agree that a probing survey of ethnic identity would be socially and scientifically valuable nonetheless argue that such a survey would be more appropriately conducted by a less official scientific institution, such as an academic survey research center. However, there is an overriding technical objection to disconnecting such a survey from the Census Bureau. Because the survey's target is ethnic minorities, efficient sampling requires a sampling frame that identifies at least the nominal ethnicity of potential respondents. The decennial census provides not just the best but the only such national sampling frame. The impracticality of adequately sampling a number of small groups from the ethnically blind sampling frames available to academic researchers is one very good reason why research on ethnicity is meager.

My proposal, therefore, is that the Bureau use the returns from the decennial census to classify the nation's people according to nominal ethnic status, then sample as many of the minority groups as informed judgment and budgets allow; then survey each group, using a carefully designed, probing instrument to elicit both the intensity and objective correlatives of ethnic self-identification.\*

I believe that the results of such a survey would substantially alter our current conceptions of the categorical structure and social significance of ethnic identity. From these findings, the Bureau could construct a less ambiguous and more efficient instrument for ethnic identification in future decennial censuses and sample surveys. The Bureau would be better equipped to resist pressure for favored

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by the discussants of questions that have elicited widespread hostility from respondents, or even that have met with a high proportion of refusals to answer." (Ibid., p. 1.)

\* Although both instrument design and sampling for such a survey are well within the state of the art, field procedures would present some formidable difficulties. The sampled households would be widely dispersed geographically, a substantial number would have moved from their April 1980 addresses, and language barriers would complicate interviewing.

treatment in instrument design from what we should expect to be an increasing number of ethnic lobbies with increasingly divergent interests. There is even some chance that the results of such a postcensal survey would be so startling that they would alter the political or legal premises of affirmative action. Most certainly, the findings would enhance our national understanding of the facts and social implications of "cultural pluralism" in American life.

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